ISSN 0301-603X

THE NATURE AND DETERMINANTS OF OPINION LEADERSHIP IN LESOTHO

R.F.Williams[1] and G.H. Düvel[2]

Correspondence author: Prof G.H. Düvel, Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa, Tel.: +27-12-420 3811, Fax.: +27-12-420 3247, e-mail: gustav.duvel@up.ac.za

Keywords: Opinion leadership, importance, formal education, strength, influence, production efficiency.

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the nature, the occurrence and the factors influencing opinion leadership in Lesotho. The focus is on a typical rural district where 200 maize farmers were randomly selected and their opinion leaders identified by means of sociometric methods with the number of nominations as the major indicator of degree of influence or strength of opinion leadership. The findings confirm the importance of opinion leadership, which is primarily influenced by age, marital status and gender, but also questions the value or quality of influence from a production efficiency point of view because opinion leaders have a lower level of formal education, make less use of the printed media, are not more efficient than their followers and tend to be very polymorphous in nature. The proper use of opinion leaders poses many challenges, but very favourable is that psychological accessibility is no constraint. Unfortunately the opposite is the case as far as distance or physical accessibility is concerned.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

Focusing communication messages on certain influentials, in the assumption that their influence will come to bear in the further diffusion to and influence on the other members of the target audience, makes sense, especially if personal influence is called for but large numbers or a wide change agent/client ratio make it difficult. This is typically the case in many developing countries where there is usually a

[1] *MSc Student, Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002.*
[2] *Professor and Director, South African Institute for Agricultural Extension, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa.*

shortage of extension workers to facilitate a quick dissemination of agricultural messages. In this context it is fair to assume that the use of influential farmers or opinion leaders can significantly contribute towards an increased diffusion effect.

However, there is also evidence suggesting that the "trickle-down" of information and influence does not always occur to a significant degree (Chege, Röling, Suurs & Ascroft, 1976). Lipton and Longhurst (1985) and Parent and Lovejoy (1987) also come to the conclusion that the influence of opinion leaders is grossly over-estimated.

Little, if anything, is known regarding the occurrence of opinion leaders in Lesotho, their influence, the factors contributing to their influence and – with a view to their identification – their characteristics. To establish these and related issues was the purpose of the research.

2. METHODOLOGY

A 20 percent random sample comprising 200 households was drawn by list sampling in the Qeme area and included in the survey. In every sampled household the main decision maker regarding the farming operations was interviewed. The choice of the survey area was based on its representativeness of a typical rural community with a high dependence on agriculture and on its proximity to Maseru and easy access. The latter was an important consideration in view of limited financial resources available for the research. This also motivated the restriction of the survey to maize farming, which is the most important commodity in Lesotho.

The semi-structured questionnaire was validated through perusal by a panel of experts and extensively pre-tested before administered by trained interviewers, who were closely monitored by the researcher.

The sociometric method of opinion leadership identification was used and this led to an identification of 78 opinion leaders among the 200 respondents (nominated respondents) and a further 312 that were nominated by respondents as opinion leaders, but fell beyond the original sample of 200 respondents (nominated non-respondents). A differentiation was also made between (a) opinion leaders actually consulted, (b) quasi opinion leaders (nominated individuals which

respondents would consult, but had not yet actually consulted) and knowledge leaders (those assessed to be leaders on the basis of their knowledge.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Degree and distribution of opinion leadership

Opinion leadership, as defined by Rogers (1983), is the ability to informally influence individual's attitudes or behaviour in a desired way with relative frequency. This assumption that opinion leadership is a relative rather than an absolute concept, led to an analysis and categorisation based on the number of nominations and as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of respondents according to the degree of opinion leadership as reflected in the number of nominations

Opinion leadership (No. of nominations)	Respondents (part of sample)		Non-respondents (not part of sample)		Total	
	N	%	n	%	N	%
>3	13	6.5	6	2	19	3.7
3	10	5	14	4.5	24	4.7
2	21	10.5	54	17.3	75	14.6
1	34	17	238	76.2	272	53.1
0	122	61	0	0	122	23.8
Total	**200**	**100**	**312**	**100**	**512**	**100**

An indication of the scope of opinion leadership can be gained from the nominations within the group of respondents. According to these findings, and regarding one or more nominations as an indication of opinion leadership, 39 percent have been nominated and thus qualify opinion leaders. This implies that about one-third of the population can be regarded as opinion leaders. The strong opinion leaders (three or more nominations) are significantly less, namely 11.5 percent.

3.2 Polymorphism and monomorphism

The potential impact of opinion leaders as identified above will depend largely on whether they have influence in only a limited field or commodity (monomorphism) or whether their influence extends over a multitude of subject areas (polymorphism). Table 2 is a categorization of opinion leaders in terms of the number of subject areas in which they have influence.

The distribution (Table 2) reflects a clear relationship between strength of opinion leadership and the degree of polymorphism. The stronger the influence, the bigger the number of knowledge areas in which the opinion leaders have influence. Evidence of this is that all the strongest leaders (more than three nominations) amongst the respondents and non-respondents have influence in five or six different fields or commodities, while only 23.5 and 10.7 percent of the weakest opinion leaders (one nomination) among the respondents and non– respondents respectively had influence in that number of different fields. In fact the increase in polymorphism with an increase in opinion leadership is almost linear in nature.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of opinion leaders according to their degree of influence (number of nominations) and number of fields of influence

Opinion leadership (No. of nominations)	Number of knowledge areas (commodities)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
(a) Respondents (N=78)						
>3	0	0	0	0	38.5	61.5
3	0	0	0	10	50.0	40.0
2	0	0	19.1	23.8	19.1	38.0
1	2.9	23.6	24.4	20.6	8.8	14.7
(b) Non-respondents (N=312)						
>3	0	0	0	0	40.0	60.0
3	0	0	14.3	14.3	35.7	35.7
2	0	4.6	22.7	27.3	29.5	15.9
1	16.6	42.2	26.6	14.0	7.0	3.7

It obviously cannot be ruled out that with increased consultations more fields of competence tend to be covered, but it does seem that the very influential opinion leaders are strongly polymorphic in nature.

3.3 Accessibility of opinion leaders

Rogers and Kincaid (1981) are of the opinion that individuals form network links that require the least effort. People in the immediate environment are, therefore, likely to have more influence than those who are far, because they are physically more accessible when their advice is needed. Consequently it can be assumed that most opinion leaders are in relatively close proximity of those who consult them.

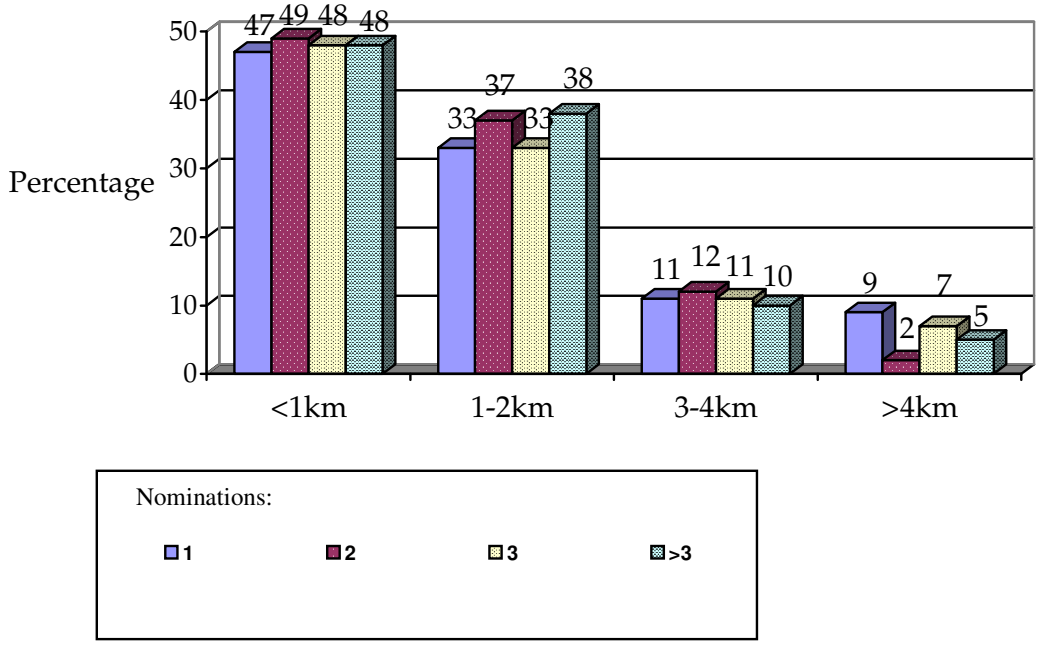

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of opinion leaders according to strength of opinion leadership (number of nominations) and consultation proximity

In all cases, that is as far as every opinion leadership category is concerned, there is an almost linear decrease in consultations with increasing distance (Figure 1). This seems to indicate that physical accessibility is an important factor in opinion leadership relationships and that distance can be an important constraint. This is emphasised by

the fact that between 80 and 86 percent of the opinion leaders consulted were within a radius of 2km or less.

Accessibility also has a socio-psychological dimension, which is generally accepted as a key dimension of opinion leadership. Somebody with a high level of knowledge and competence and thus with a high potential influence, is unlikely to exert this influence unless he or she is perceived to be accessible as a person. The question as to whether socio-psychological accessibility is a limiting factor in the Lesotho situation was investigated by analysing respondents' assessment of the various opinion leader's degree of accessibility and comparing this with the quasi opinion leaders and the so-called knowledge leaders (Figure 2).

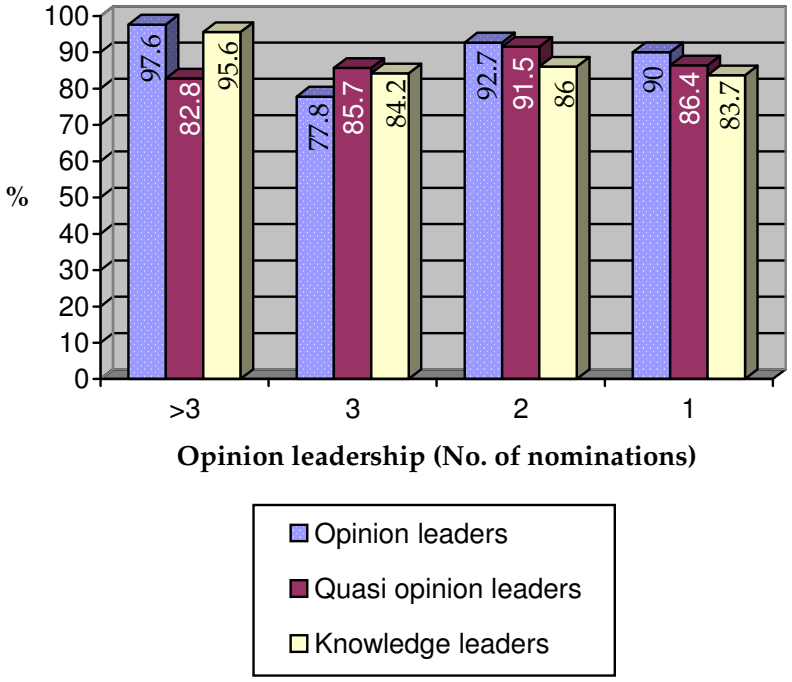

Figure 2: The percentage opinion leaders, quasi opinion leaders and knowledge leaders assessed to have a high or very high accessibility

The first impression is that the overall accessibility is exceedingly high and not likely to be a constraint. This is further supported by the fact that no significant differences occur between the different types of leaders, namely the opinion leaders, quasi opinion leaders (nominated as potential influential, but not consulted) and knowledge leaders

(those judged to be the most knowledgeable) regarding accessibility. Even the most knowledgeable leaders that are normally not consulted, are assessed to be equally accessible, which is in contradiction with Düvel's findings (1996) from a sample of white commercial farmers in South Africa, and seems to suggest that in the culture of this black community in Lesotho everybody is equally accessible, or that accessibility is not a problem with any section of the community.

Further evidence that accessibility is not a constraint, lies in the fact that even status which is normally associated with accessibility (Düvel, 1996), shows no correlation with accessibility ($r = -0.014$, $p = 0.84$). It is noteworthy that about 40 percent of all opinion leaders are described as good friends, and the percentage 'good friends' among those with the highest accessibility is as high as 57. This is an indication that friendship contributes to accessibility or is a dimension of it.

3.4 Age of opinion leaders

Age is assumed to have an influence on opinion leadership, because it is associated with experience and maturity. In a many cases the older farmers are those that have retired from other employment and are likely to depend, more than others, on farming as their main source of income.

The study shows that opinion leadership appears to be earned after many years of accumulated experience. Evidence of this is shown in Table 3 and manifests itself in the fact that 54 percent of the strongest opinion leaders (> 3 nominations) were found to be above 50 years of age, while only 24 percent of the weakest opinion leaders (1 nomination) were in the same age category.

Evidence of the higher age is also found in the weighted values, which are significantly higher in the case of the strongest opinion leaders (3.7) compared to those of the other leadership categories (2.7 to 3.0). However, and this is also reflected by the weighted values, there is otherwise no linear relationship between age and strength of opinion leadership.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of respondents according to age and degree of opinion leadership as reflected in the number of nominations

Age	Frequency distribution per opinion leadership category (number of nominations)										Total	
	>3		3		2		1		0			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
<30 (1)	0	0	0	0	1	5	4	12	13	11	18	9
31-40 (2)	1	8	3	30	7	33	13	38	31	25	55	27.5
41- 50(3)	5	38	6	60	3	14	9	26	38	31	61	30.5
51-60(4)	5	38	0	0	8	38	5	15	30	24	48	24
61-70(5)	1	8	1	10	1	5	2	6	7	6	12	6
>70 (6)	1	8	0	0	1	5	1	3	3	3	6	3
Wt. Mean	3.7		2.9		3.1		2.7		3.0		3.0	
Totals	13	100	10	100	21	100	34	100	122	100	200	

Chi^2 =149.16, df = 20, p = 0.00

3.5 Educational background of pinion leaders

Educational background can logically be assumed to have an influence on opinion leadership, but according to the findings of this study (Table 4), this is not the case. In fact the opposite seems to be the case.

Table 4: Frequency distribution of respondents according to educational background and degree of opinion leadership as reflected in the number of nominations

Education	Frequency distribution per opinion leadership category (number of nominations)										Total	
	>3		3		2		1		0			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
None (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.9	1	0.8	2	1.0
Primary(2)	8	61.5	4	40.0	11	52.4	8	23.5	19	15.6	49	24.5
Secondary(3)	4	30.8	3	30.0	5	23.8	11	32.4	41	33.6	64	32.0
H. School(4)	1	7.7	2	20.0	3	14.3	11	32.4	37	30.3	54	27.0
Tertiary (5)	0	0	1	10.0	2	9.5	3	8.8	23	18.9	29	14.5
Degree (6)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.8	2	1.0
Wt. Mean	**2.5**		**3.0**		**2.8**		**3.2**		**3.5**		**3.3**	
Totals	**13**	**100**	**10**	**100**	**21**	**100**	**34**	**100**	**122**	**100**	**200**	**100**

r = -0.257; p = 0.01

The negative relationship between opinion leadership and formal qualification is reflected in the significant negative correlation ($r = -0.257$; $p = 0.01$). For example as many as 61.5 percent of strongest opinion leaders have only a primary education while the percentage with this low level of education is only 15.6 amongst the followers or non-leaders. Similarly only 7.7 percent of the strongest opinion leaders have a high school or higher education as compared to at least 30 percent in the other leadership categories and the followers (non-leaders).

The above could lead to the conclusion that an education is a constraint as far as opinion leadership is concerned. However, it cannot be ruled out that this is because of the negative correlation between age and education, namely that the young farmers usually have a higher education than the older generation.

3.6 Exposure to mass media

The findings in Table 5, which reflect the contact that respondents had with different information sources, indicate that the radio is the most frequently used source of information in all the nomination categories for both general advice and maize production, with mean total contacts of 276.44 and 162.41 per annum respectively. With the exception of the leadership category of 3 nominations, the intensity of using radio increases with increasing leadership strength. The strongest opinion leaders (>3 nominations) have a mean of 362 contacts per year while their followers (no nominations) have 245. This does indicate that opinion leaders, as has already been found by Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1966, have more exposure to mass media than non-leaders. This, however, does not apply to the printed media, where the opposite seems to be the case, but where the low contact can be attributed to the low level of education.

3.7 Gender of opinion leaders

The land tenure system of Lesotho does not give females many rights regarding the allocation of land for farming. Females only inherit land that was previously owned by their deceased husbands. This makes them feature less prominently in farming, and presumably also as opinion leaders.

Table 5: Mean number of contacts with different sources of information per year

Sources	Mean contacts per opinion leadership category (number of nominations)					Total[3]
	>3	3	2	1	0	
	n=13	n= 10	n=21	n=34	n=122	N=200
(a) General advice						
Radio	362	264	348	316	245	276.44
Research	2	25	8	10	15	13.07
Printed media	25	48	29	30	33	32.30
Extension	2	2	6	6	7	6.15
Fellow farmer	26	30	22	32	38	34.12
(b) Maize production						
Radio	203	137	250	134	153	162.41
Research	2	25	8	10	14	12.46
Printed media	25	48	29	29	33	32.13
Extension	2	2	6	6	7	6.15
Fellow farmer	27	30	20	39	42	37.61

The findings in Table 6 indicate that there are more male opinion leaders (125) than females (75) in maize production in Lesotho and their influence is also bigger ($Chi^2 = 15.950$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.001$; $r = -0.190$, $p = 0.007$) . The major difference as far as gender is concerned is amongst the strongest opinion leaders (more than 3 nominations). 28.8 percent of the male opinion leaders fall into this category, whereas only 8 percent of the female farmers qualify as strong opinion leaders.

The subordinate role of women in agriculture is also reflected in the influence of opinion leadership, but it can be expected that as the females' role in agriculture become more prominent, their influence in opinion leadership is also likely to increase, accepting, of course, that cultural constraints will be overcome.

[3] *Total = (summation of mean contacts per year, per information source* n in each nomination category)/N.*

Table 6: Frequency distribution of opinion leaders according to their gender and degree of opinion leadership as reflected in the number of nominations

Opinion leadership (number of nominations)	Frequency distribution per gender				Total	
	Male		Female			
	n	%	n	%	N	%
1	54	43.2	36	48.0	90	45.0
2	18	14.4	23	30.7	41	20.5
3	17	13.6	10	13.3	27	13.5
>3	36	28.8	6	8.0	42	21.0
Total	125	62.5	75	37.5	200	100

Chi^2 = 15.950, df = 3, p = 0.00; r = -0.190, p = 0.007

3.8 Environmental factors

Since opinion leadership is, not unlike general leadership, a situation-dependent phenomenon, not only personal but also environmental factors are expected to have a potential influence on opinion leadership. Factors investigated are the scale of operation and production efficiency. With no objective measures available, these variables were assessed on a perceived comparative basis.

The findings in Table 7 indicate that around 80 percent of the respondents consult individuals who operate on the same or higher scale than they do.

Table 7: Frequency distribution of opinion leaders according to their relative scale of operation and degree of opinion leadership

Leader category (number of nominations)	Frequency distribution per comparative scale of operation						Total	
	Lower		Same		Higher			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
1	16	17.8	49	54.4	25	27.8	90	45.0
2	6	14.6	23	56.1	12	29.3	41	20.5
3	5	18.5	11	40.7	11	40.7	27	13.5
>3	14	33.3	13	31.0	15	35.7	42	21.0
Totals	**41**	**20.5**	**96**	**48.0**	**63**	**31.5**	**200**	**100**

Chi^2= 10.047, df=6 , p = 0.123 r = 0.023 p = 0.751

However the level of operation is not related to the degree of opinion leadership (r = 0.023, p = 0.751) and suggests that the scale of operation is not an important factor in opinion leadership. The absence of a significant relationship could, however, also be attributed to a lack of variation as far as farm sizes within the survey area are concerned.

If an individual wants to improve the profitability of his farming enterprise, he would have to seek information from someone who is either on the same level of efficiency or higher. Therefore the expectation is that individuals with the most number of nominations will be more efficient than the respondents consulting them. This relationship between the strength of opinion leadership (number of nominations) farming efficiency is shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Frequency distribution of consulting opinion leaders according to their level of farming efficiency and degree of opinion leadership

Leader category (number of nominations)	Frequency distribution per relative level of farming efficiency						Total	
	Lower		Same		Higher			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
1	4	4.4	54	60.0	32	35.6	90	45.0
2	0	0	30	73.2	11	26.8	41	20.5
3	1	3.7	14	51.9	12	44.4	27	13.5
>3	1	2.4	27	64.3	14	33.3	42	21.0
Totals *	**6**	**3.0**	**125**	**62.5**	**69**	**34.5**	**200**	**100**

Chi^2 = 4.821, df=6 , p = 0.567; r = 0.013, p = 0.851

Both the distributions as well as the statistical parameters (Chi^2 = 4.821, df = 6, p = 0.567; r = 0.013, p = 0.851) leave no doubt that opinion leadership is not related to farming efficiency. The strong opinion leaders are not awarded a higher comparative farming efficiency than those with less influence. This is in contradiction with other research findings (Rogers, 1983) and could be attributed to the subsistence nature of the farming where increasing profitability is not necessarily an important motive.

3.9 Marital status of opinion leaders

Marital status, namely; whether married, divorced, widowed or single, is given different interpretations in different cultures, which may affect the way an individual is perceived and thus be consulted for advice or not. It is a common belief in Lesotho, that good advice can only be obtained from married individuals that are characterized as good farmers, wise decision makers, well respected, experienced and responsible. The findings regarding marital status are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9: Frequency distribution of opinion leaders according to marital status and degree of opinion leadership as reflected in the number of nominations

Marital status	Frequency distribution per opinion leadership category (number of nominations)										Total	
	>3		3		2		1		0			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
Married	11	85	7	70	17	81	27	79	70	57	132	66
Divorced	0	0	1	10	0	0	2	6	9	7	12	6
Widow	0	0	0	0	3	14	1	3	7	6	11	5.5
Widower	2	15	0	0	1	5	1	3	7	6	11	5.5
Single	0	0	2	20	0	0	3	9	29	24	34	17
Total	**13**	**100**	**10**	**100**	**21**	**100**	**34**	**100**	**122**	**100**	**200**	**100**

$Chi^2 = 10.9$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.027$; $r = 0.221$, $p=0.002$

Of all the respondents 66 percent are married while the remaining third are unmarried, viz. single, widowed or divorced. When relating the marital status (married versus unmarried) with opinion leadership, the relationship is highly significant (*$Chi^2 = 10.9$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.027$; $r = 0.221$, $p=0.002$*), which supports the assumption that marital status does in fact influence the decision regarding the choice of individuals that are consulted. 85 percent of the strongest opinion leaders are married, while the percentage among the other opinion leaders is between 70-81 and among the followers only 57 percent. This is indicative of a tendency that the stronger the opinion leaders in terms of influence (based on number of nominations), the more likely it is that they are married.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Opinion leadership is undoubtedly an important phenomenon among maize farmers in Lesotho, but its extent is dependent on how opinion leadership is defined. If two nominations or consultation by two individuals were regarded as meaningful, then as many as one-quarter of the population can be regarded as opinion leaders. With one consultation or nomination as parameter, this percentage goes up to more than 75 percent. This is, from a mere quantitative point of view, indicative of a tremendous potential.

However, from a qualitative point of view, namely the contribution towards more efficient and profitable farming, there is reason to question the opinion leaders' contribution. They are, for example, not more efficient than there followers. Furthermore, they are less qualified (have a lower level of education) they are older and the majority of them are males and are thus less likely to be accessible to the increasing number of female farmers. Although they listen more to the radio, they read less and thus have less access to the important source of printed media.

Another reason for questioning the quality of the influence from a production efficiency point of view is that distance is a serious limiting factor, resulting in the choice of 80 percent of the most influential opinion leaders to be within a radius of 2km. This does not allow for much selection in terms of knowledge or competence of opinion leaders and rather creates the impression that current opinion leaders are primarily neighbours and more than likely even members of extended families. Evidence supporting this conclusion, namely that opinion leaders are still very much part of the traditional culture and its authority structures, is the important aspect of age and marital status determining their influence and also the general polymorphic nature of the opinion leadership.

The challenge facing agricultural extension is to exploit the potential inherent in opinion leadership in Lesotho. Extremely favourable in this regard is that – unlike what Düvel (1996) found among commercial white farmers in South Africa – accessibility seems to be no constraint whatsoever in the Lesotho rural situation. This would imply that the major constraint to overcome is the provision of the necessary

knowledge and competence. For this to be effective it still has to be directed at those opinion leaders that meet the credibility criteria such as seniority, geographical proximity and family association.

Although this research provides valuable insights, it will have to be extended to assess the scope of opinion leadership in other areas and in regard to other commodities. The measurement of opinion leadership will also have to be refined to reflect more of the qualitative rather than only the quantitative influence or impact. It is also possible that what was identified, as a lack of positive influence from a production efficiency point of view, might even be a negative influence. In that case the challenge will be to restrict the negative influence or the influence of negative opinion leaders, and this focuses the research need on the phenomenon of "negative opinion leadership."

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